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Book Review: The Interpretation of Mark

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Christ. Here it is this contrast, and not Wallis’ somewhat Calvinistic worry, that controls Paul’s discussion.

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This book is the most comprehensive and up-to-date introduction available today to the study of Mark’s gospel. Telford begins the book with an essay in which he surveys important developments and issues in the interpretation of Mark, highlighting the scholarship of the last half of the 20th century. Both the introductory chapter and the extensive bibliography at the end have been updated since the first edition of this work in 1985. In the initial chapter, Telford examines the history of interpretation of Mark’s gospel, the major issues that remain unresolved in the scholarly debate, and the significant themes emphasized by Mark in his gospel. On the whole, Telford keeps his evaluation of different scholarly positions to a minimum, but he does show that the trend in scholarship is away from the older view that Mark’s gospel is a simple, unsophisticated and untheological report on the life of Jesus.

Next in the book comes a series of previously published articles, which serve as examples of recent scholarship on the gospel of Mark. Telford selected these essays, including several that are new to the second edition, for a number of reasons. Some are written by pillars of recent research on Mark, such as Eduard Schweizer, Norman Perrin and Ernest Best; some illustrate newer methodologies, such as structuralism, narrative criticism and reader-response criticism; and some have proven to be seminal works that continue to influence the discussion of significant issues in the interpretation of Mark.

Two of the more influential articles in this collection both touch on Mark’s unusually harsh presentation of the disciples. In “The Heresy that Necessitated Mark’s Gospel,” Theodore J. Weeden argues that Mark used the disciples to represent the false teaching of his theological opponents. Like Mark’s opponents, the disciples held to a false Christology, which emphasizes the miraculous activity of Jesus as a divine man and neglects the suffering and death of Jesus. By thoroughly discrediting the disciples in the gospel, Mark also discredited his opponents and sought to settle the theological dispute that was raging in his own community. “The Disciples in Mark: The Function of a Narrative Role,” by Robert C. Tannehill, continues to be influential both for its conclusions concerning the disciples in Mark and for its use of a more literary approach to the gospels. As Tannehill points out, the presentation of the disciples is not entirely negative. Mark started his story with a positive view of the disciples, and only later in the narrative did he show the inadequacy of the disciples’ response to Jesus. Mark did not aim to discredit the disciples or anyone else. Rather he wanted to encourage his readers to identify with the disciples initially and then to reflect on their own response to Jesus in light of the failure of the disciples. In comparing these two approaches to the disciples, most students of Mark’s gospel would probably agree with Tannehill that Mark’s purpose is pastoral rather than polemical.

In summary, the literature on the gospel of Mark has become so extensive that a road map of the research is very helpful, and this volume edited by Telford provides such a map.

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